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REPORT BY THE  
COMPTROLLER GENERAL  
OF THE UNITED STATES

U.S. ANTISATELLITE PROGRAM  
NEEDS A FRESH LOOK

D I G E S T

Current and projected Soviet space capabilities are a known threat to U.S. and allied land, sea, air, and space forces. According to the Department of Defense (DOD), the Soviets have a vigorous and constantly expanding military space program. Soviet space systems support reconnaissance, electronic intelligence, missile launch detection, communications, meteorology, and navigation. The Soviets have the only antisatellite system known to be operational.

The demonstrated Soviet antisatellite system poses a known threat to U.S. satellites. It is anticipated the Soviets will continue work in this area.

The United States is pursuing an antisatellite development program, using miniature vehicles launched from an F-15 aircraft and propelled by a two-stage missile. The cost to complete the system has been estimated at about \$3.6 billion.

When the Air Force selected the miniature vehicle technology as the primary solution to the antisatellite mission, it was envisioned as a relatively cheap, quick way to get an anti-satellite system that would meet the mission requirements. This is no longer the case. It will be a more complex and expensive task than originally envisioned, potentially costing in the tens of billions of dollars.

Now is the time to determine whether the United States is developing the appropriate capability to perform the antisatellite mission.

TECHNOLOGICALLY FEASIBLE  
ALTERNATIVES TO THE MINIATURE  
VEHICLE EXIST

GAO compared several alternatives to the miniature vehicle. These included

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- ground-based lasers,
- airborne lasers, and
- space-based lasers.

Since these weapons are based on different technology than the miniature vehicle, their cost, schedule, and performance characteristics differ. Although some recent studies have been made of alternatives, they are not fully comparable because they are based on different assumptions. A new antisatellite assessment needs to be made for all antisatellite alternatives.

Based on comments from DOD officials on GAO's draft report, it appears that DOD is fully committed to producing the current air-launched miniature vehicle system, unless development is unsuccessful. GAO was told that this course of action best recognizes the current political, military, and financial realities. GAO believes that this is an issue the Congress may wish to consider and determine whether it agrees with DOD's plans for obtaining the capability to perform the antisatellite mission.

#### RECOMMENDATION TO THE CONGRESS

GAO recommends that the Congress review DOD's plans for performing the antisatellite mission. The Congress may wish to direct DOD to provide it with a current assessment of alternatives to the miniature vehicle type antisatellite system to enable it to make a timely evaluation of DOD's plans before the air-launched miniature vehicle enters production.

#### AGENCY COMMENTS

GAO received official oral comments from DOD on a draft of this report. DOD disagreed with GAO's interpretation of the facts presented and the overall negative tone of the report toward the air-launched miniature vehicle program. DOD believes that evaluating the current air-launched miniature vehicle's performance against the current 1981 Joint Chiefs of Staff's antisatellite requirements instead of the requirements stated in the current Mission

Element Needs Statement was inappropriate. GAO believes that it is appropriate and therefore disagrees with DOD's position.

. . . . .

GAO's review of the current Air Force anti-satellite program and alternative weapon systems capable of providing an antisatellite capability was undertaken as a result of the interest in the area by the Congress and DOD. GAO's review assessed DOD analyses of anti-satellite alternatives, including the estimated costs of these alternatives.

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